

Ballistics Tests — 28 Years Later

Did Ray's rifle shoot fatal bullet?

By Michael Dorman
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Ballistics experts began firing test bullets into a 900-gallon water tank yesterday, attempting to determine whether the rifle presumed to have killed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. actually fired the murder bullet.

The tests were conducted at the University of Rhode Island crime lab in South Kingstown under a Tennessee court order issued last week at the request of James Earl Ray's lawyers. For the first time in nearly 20 years the rifle and bullet were seen publicly when delivered to the crime lab for the tests. The weapon, a .30-06 hunting rifle, was admittedly owned by Ray and bore his fingerprint. It was discovered near the murder scene with other items traceable to Ray.

Previous ballistics tests showed that the fatal bullet came from a .30-06 rifle of the same type as Ray's weapon. Because of those findings and the discovery of Ray's gun near the assassination site, investigators concluded it was the murder weapon. But the

mangled condition of the bullet made that impossible to prove, Memphis prosecutor John Campbell said.

Defense lawyer William Pepper contends that scientific advances since the 1968 assassination make possible more sophisticated ballistics tests that might demonstrate that Ray's gun did not fire the fatal bullet, providing grounds for a full-scale trial.

The evidence against Ray has never been put to a stringent courtroom test because he pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing King — thus evading a possible death sentence and receiving a plea-bargained 99-year term. Ray, 69, now claims he did not fire the fatal shot but may have been a patsy in a conspiracy. He has been described as near death with a liver disease in a Nashville prison hospital.

The three ballistics experts conducting the tests are George Reich from the Suffolk County police laboratory, University of Rhode Island criminologist Robert Hathaway and Marshall Robinson of the Connecticut state police laboratory.



James Earl Ray



Martin Luther King



AP Photo

Firearms expert George Reich shoots round from rifle allegedly used to assassinate King.

They plan to fire the Ray rifle into the water tank 18 times by late Friday. The bullets will be examined under microscopes at the Rhode Island lab. The bullets and rifle then will be sent to a private lab, CamScan USA Inc., in Cranberry Township, Pa., where a scanning electron microscope will compare the bullets.

Donning protective goggles and earplugs, Hathaway fired a practice round from a weapon similar to Ray's into the

5-foot-high aluminum tank yesterday. "Water is the best medium for recovering test bullets," he said. "It doesn't damage the outer edge of the bullet like cotton and other materials can."

Each gun barrel has one-of-a-kind markings that are transferred to bullet casings when fired to create markings as distinct as fingerprints, Hathaway explained.

"This case is going to be quite exciting," he said. "It's just electrifying."